[Conference on Church, Community and State]

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PROGRAMME

OF

WORK

in Preparation for
the World Conference of Churches
in 1937

on

Church, Community and State

UNIVERSAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL FOR LIFE AND WORK

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CHURCH, COMMUNITY AND STATE

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What is at Stake

The totalitarian claims advanced today in various quarters on behalf of the modern State to control and shape the whole life of the community, however startling they may be, are only the culminating expression of tendencies towards governmental control and social uniformity which are present everywhere and affect the entire life of mankind. What the State does openly and directly the Community may achieve by less deliberate and less easily perceptible but hardly less effective methods. Through eugenic measures, education, literature, broadcasting and the press it may organise, direct and mould the whole life of its members from the cradle to the grave. The attempt to control and shape the whole life of a community and to utilise for this purpose the incalculable resources of modern science marks a new and fateful epoch in the history of mankind. For such an attempt must be based, consciously or unconsciously, on certain assumptions regarding the meaning of human life and destiny. It is a question of vital import for the future of mankind whether these assumptions are compatible with, or are a more or less complete denial of, the Christian understanding of the life of man. The Christian Church throughout the world is confronted with a crisis of the first magnitude, and it is clearly necessary that the Churches should take counsel with one another regarding it.

Ecumenical Co-operation

The organisation required for such common consultation is providentially already in existence in the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, which was formed as the result of a Conference of the Churches held in Stockholm in 1925, and which is fortunate in having had for some years a Department of Research with its headquarters at Geneva. [1] Already two

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1In preparing for the Conference in 1937 the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work has the active co-operation of the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches, and is in close touch with the other Ecumenical Movements — the World Conference on Faith and Order, the International Missionary Council, the World's Student Christian Federation and the other international Christian youth movements.

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or three hundred of the ablest Christian minds, lay as well as theological, in various countries, are actively engaged in the serious study of, and in a fruitful exchange of thought regarding, the issues involved in the relations between Church, Community and State in the new forms in which they present themselves today.

The Proposed Conference in 1937

As one means of bringing home to Christians everwhere the gravity of the new situation, of deepening their understanding of its meaning and its demands, and of assisting the Churches to bear a more united and more deeply considered Christian witness in relation to the problems of today, it is proposed to hold a World Conference of the Churches in 1937. It would be an almost complete misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the proposed Conference, however, to regard it as an end in itself. The effects of a Conference which is merely an isolated and unrelated event must be transient and unimportant. What the situation demands is the mobilisation of the entire resources of the whole Christian Church in an endeavour to think out afresh the nature and content of the Christian witness in relation to the powerful forces which are reshaping the thought, life and institutions of mankind. Only a sustained and continuous effort through a long period of years can accomplish this, and the proposed Conference has significance only in relation to the larger and wider purpose.

A fuller statement of the circumstances which have led to the proposal for a conference is given in the pamphlet *Church, Community and State,* by Dr. J. H. Oldham, (Student Christian Movement Press, London, 1/—. Harper and Brothers, New York, 50 cents), and to avoid increasing the length of the present statement, explanations given there are not repeated here.

The Prepatory Work

The programme of preparatory work for the conference includes nine subjects. The selection of these has not been an arbitrary choice, but they have as it were selected themselves as the result of many discussions in groups and hundreds of conversations with individuals. Formidable as the programme is, careful thought has been given to the ways and means of carrying it out, and there is a reasonable hope that good work may be done in some of the subjects, and something accomplished in regard to all of them. One cannot proceed far in the study of the relations between Church, Community and

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State without discovering that fundamental questions of ultimate belief are involved. The preparation for the conference must therefore include the examination of these issues. Three such subjects specially call for examination because of their intimate and inseparable connection with the problems of community and state.

1. *The Christian Understanding of Man*

In all the movements and systems of thought which today exercise sway over the minds of men there are involved assumptions, often unexamined and unexpressed, regarding the nature of man and the meaning of human existence. It is necessary that these assumptions should be brought into the open, and an attempt made to discover in the light of the Christian understanding of man the elements of truth and falsehood contained in them. It is proposed to publish in advance of the conference a volume in which, in the first place, there will be set forth positively the Christian conception of man as this has been understood in the main Christian traditions, and in which, secondly, the Christian view will be further elucidated by contrast with alternative views of man, such as those of idealist philosophy, naturalism and humanism, Marxism, modern biological doctrines, the new psychology, racial theories, and Chinese systems of thought.

2. *The Kingdom of God and History*

It is impossible to consider the problems of community and state without an examination of the meaning of history. It is proposed to publish a volume similar to the preceding one which will set forth some of the main contributions in Christian thought to the understanding of history, and to contrast these with other views of history such as the evolutionary and optimistic view, the Marxist understanding of history, the doctrines of national messianism and the view that history has no ultimate significance at all.

3. *The Church and the World*

It is difficult to find a suitable title for the third of these theological subjects. The Church and the World is doubtless too wide. The subject might also be described as the relation between the orders of creation and redemption. The problem with which this third volume will attempt to deal is that of the

religious meaning of those spheres of life which are not specifically religious, e. g. the spheres of culture, politics and economics. Widely different views exist on this subject, and it is essential for the discussions at the conference that these differences should be clearly elucidated.

4. *The Church*

The main subject of the conference is, as indicated in the title, the relations between Church, Community and State. Each of these three terms, however, calls for separate careful examination. Underlying the whole discussion is the question how the Church may appropriately and effectively bear its witness and express its mind and take action in the social and political spheres. This question needs deeper examination than it has yet received. The consideration of this question will inevitably open up the further question of the nature of the body which thus bears its witness and expresses its mind and acts, and, if misunderstandings and futile discussions are to be avoided, an attempt must be made in advance to clarify the main differences in the conception and understanding of the Church between those who will take part in the conference.

5. *The Community*

This term has been chosen to denote the common and shared life of a people, wider than the control and activities of organised government, various aspects of which find expression in such words as society, nation, or country. The corresponding word in the German title of the conference is *Volk,* for which there is no exact equivalent in either English or French. It will be part of the preparatory task to distinguish as fully as possible the varieties of intellectual and emotional content which the term bears among different peoples. The question must then be considered of the relation of the new, redeemed community of the Church to the common general life in which Christians as well as others share and in which they have their part to play and their responsibilities to fulfil.

6. *The State*

Considerable progress has already been made in the study of the relations between Church and State. It is expected that four volumes on this subject — two in German and two in English — will be available before the end of 1935. The papers

the centre of a local group engaged in the study of one or other of the nine subjects.

There is no reason why many thousands of groups should not be formed in local centres, in universities, in theological seminaries and in connection with various youth organisations for the study of the subjects which will engage the attention of the conference. Hundreds of such groups are already in existence in different countries. It is obviously beyond the power of the Research Department, however, to maintain direct contact with these groups. Their promotion and guidance must be undertaken by national organisations and by the Churches themselves. Aids to the study undertaken by these groups will be provided in the volumes which will be issued in preparation for the conference, one or two of which, as is indicated in the paragraph above relating to the State, are already available or will be published shortly.

The Wider Task

It cannot be too strongly asserted both that an effort of thought is indispensable as a means of understanding the present situation and of inspiring and directing action, and that thought by itself is quite insufficient to meet the demands of that situation. Only the united, living witness in act and life of the entire body of Christians can avail to stem forces by which the whole Christian understanding of life is menaced. The issue is not a theoretic or speculative one, but a life and death struggle with the demonic forces of evil. To rouse the whole body of Christian people to the reality of this conflict and to prepare and equip them for the struggle is the task of the individual Churches. In the endeavour to fulfil it, they may derive help from the world-wide fellowship of the Universal Church and the opportunities for common counsel and mutual strengthening which the ecumenical movement provides.

Date, Place and Membership of the Conference

The Conference will be held at Oxford from July 12-26, 1937. Its membership will be composed of 300 members appointed by the Churches in the different countries and of 100 additional members appointed by the Universal Christian Council after consultation with the Churches. The object of the latter provision is to ensure an adequate representation of the laity, and especially of those who possess a special knowledge of the subjects which the conference will consider.

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